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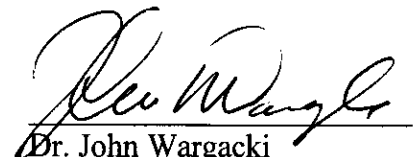
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“To die – without the Dying”:

Dickinson, Premature Burial, and Consciousness Beyond the Grave

Jeanette F. Calo

Emily Dickinson’s preoccupation with death is notorious, and much of the scholarship about her work has sought to contextualize her interest within a period the French historian Philippe Ariès dubbed “the Age of the Beautiful Death” (409). The ambiguity and sense of eternal existence that characterizes many of Dickinson’s poems about death can unnerve her readers, leaving them in a place of anxiety or even terror. By embracing the horrific, Dickinson undermines the “beautiful death” with terrifying scenes that resemble the work of her contemporary, Edgar Allen Poe. One element that makes Poe’s works terrifying is the recurring trope of premature burial. In the short story “The Premature Burial,” Poe’s narrator attests to the regularity of such occurrences, which he attributes to an inability to isolate the moment of death: “The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins?” (258). While such a statement might merely entertain the modern reader, it would have not surprised the nineteenth-century one. The popularity of Poe’s stories illustrates a phenomenon his public feared. While the influence of this collective fear of premature interment on Dickinson’s work has not been fully explored, the breadth of her poems concerning death indicate that she was just as uneasy with the “boundaries which divide Life and Death” as Poe’s narrator. Through poems narrated by “undead” speakers, Dickinson examines the “shadowy and vague” border between death and life that haunted the nineteenth-century mind. This study concerns Dickinson’s examination and use of this cultural fear to express her own fear of being “buried alive”; however, rather than the physical reality of premature interment, Dickinson’s is horror at the prospect of a consciousness in death that lasts for eternity. She exorcises this fear by entering into death through her poetry.

## Works Cited

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“To die – without the Dying”:

Dickinson, Premature Burial, and Consciousness Beyond the Grave

To die – without the Dying

And live without the Life

This is the hardest Miracle

Propounded to Belief. (J1017, F1027)<sup>1</sup>

In an 1858 letter to Mr. and Mrs. J.G. Holland, Emily Dickinson comments on the pervasiveness of death that seemed to envelop her life: “I can’t stay any longer in a world of death. [...] I thought perhaps that *you* were dead, and not knowing the sexton’s address, interrogate the daisies. Ah! dainty—dainty Death! Ah! democratic Death. [...] Say, is he everywhere? Where shall I hide my things? Who is alive?” (L195)<sup>2</sup>. This capricious mourning, which includes grief over her dead garden, would likely have amused Dickinson’s friends. However, the letter contains a seriousness that underlies the poet’s expansive body of work—the identification and characterization of death.

Dickinson’s absorption with death is notorious, and much scholarship on her work has sought to contextualize the poet’s preoccupation in a period French historian Philippe Ariès dubbed “the Age of the Beautiful Death” (409). As many historians have noted, the nineteenth-century was marked by a collective fascination with sentimentalizing and domesticating death. Numerous examples of art from the period depict deathbed scenes with the deceased gazing upward to heaven as loving friends and family mourn and celebrate the soul’s departure. In many sentimental novels, the death scene is a prolonged affair tendering a moral lesson, as illustrated by the death of Eva St. Clare in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Eva’s

lengthy death, accompanied by visions of heaven and the spiritual conversion of the characters around her, illustrates Garrett Stewart's wry observation that "characters die more often, more slowly, and more vocally in the Victorian age than ever before and ever since" (8). Popular poetry domesticated death by describing graves as homes and coffins as beds. As their art demonstrates, nineteenth-century Americans sentimentalized death, choosing to view it as a temporary separation from loved ones and a beautiful passage to eternal life.

Several critics, including Maria Magdalena Farland, have noted that many of Dickinson's death poems echo these conventions, including "The grave my little cottage is" (J1743, F1784), "Because I could not stop for Death—" (J712, F479), and the brief "A Dimple in the Tomb" (J1489, F1522): "A Dimple in the Tomb / Makes that ferocious Room / A Home—" (1-3). However, Farland argues that Dickinson's portrayal of death deliberately strays from the sentimental view: "[W]here sentimental fictions domesticate death, Dickinson's poems detach and strip it bare" (369). Recent critics examining the sublime in Dickinson's death poetry<sup>3</sup> emphasize how she takes her readers past the boundaries of their own imaginations—and leaves them there. Indeed, the ambiguity and sense of eternal existence that characterize many of her poems about death can unnerve readers, leaving them in a place of anxiety or even terror. With this characteristic, Dickinson might be categorized as one of James Farrell's "second group of Romantics," a group of writers who saw death as a source of the sublime: "Like Edgar Allen Poe, they stressed the horror of death to elicit fear, the strongest of human emotions. [...] They emphasized the horrors of death and the grave, the futile fight with conqueror worm, and the terrible prospect of burial alive" (33-4). By embracing the horrific, Dickinson undermines the "beautiful death" with terrifying scenes of vacuity that resemble the work of Poe more closely than that of Stowe.

One element that makes Poe's works terrifying is the recurring trope of premature burial in many of his short stories, most memorably "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Berenice." In the less-anthologized "The Premature Burial," a macabre tale relating sordid details of live burials, Poe's narrator emphasizes the regularity of such occurrences: "That it has frequently, very frequently, so fallen will scarcely be denied by those who think. The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins?" (258). While such a statement might merely entertain the modern reader, it would have not surprised the nineteenth-century one. As Jan Bondeson notes in *Buried Alive: The Terrifying History of Our Most Primal Fear*, Poe was capitalizing on the "medical fears and obsessions of his time" (10). The popularity of Poe's stories of premature interment illustrates a phenomenon his public feared "almost as much as they feared other horrors of the grave," according to James Farrell, author of *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920* (163). While scholars in the last two decades have painstakingly placed Dickinson's work into a cultural context, the influence of this collective fear of premature burial on her work has not been fully explored. The breadth of Dickinson's poems concerning death and the afterlife indicate that she was just as uneasy with the "boundaries which divide Life and Death" as Poe's narrator. Through poems narrated by "undead" speakers, Dickinson examines the "shadowy and vague" border between death and life that haunted the nineteenth-century mind. The purpose of this study is to explore how Dickinson examines and utilizes this cultural fear to express her own fear of being "buried alive"—however, rather than the physical reality of premature interment, Dickinson's is horror at the prospect of a consciousness in death that lasts for eternity.

Several historians attest that a collective fear of premature burial pervaded the nineteenth century. In his seminal *The Hour of Our Death*, Ariès devotes much time to apparent death and



the “universal panic” that “had taken hold of people’s minds at the idea of being buried alive, of waking up in the bottom of a grave” (396). Generated in part by books and pamphlets on the dangers of premature interment, the final decades of both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were particularly marked by this anxiety. While contemporary medical experts debate the amounts and veracity of such occurrences, the fear was very real. The panic was fueled by stories published in the popular press, which often capitalized on the sensationalism. An article published in *The New York Times* in 1874 is representative of such stories:

For some time the work of removing bodies from an old to a new Roman Catholic cemetery had been in progress. In the course of the process, the lid of a coffin came off [...] and the contents presented a terrible spectacle. “The miserable occupant had evidently lived in it. His face was contorted into an agonized expression; the arms were drawn up as far as the coffin would admit, and the head was twisted round to the shoulders, which apparently had been gnawed by the wretched man himself.” (2)

Instances of individuals awakening moments before their interment—or days after—were also publicized, whether spread through the press or by word of mouth. These moments of “resurrection,” which especially occurred in the eighteenth century and earlier half of nineteenth century, were the result of doctors who prematurely pronounced the death of an unconscious or comatose person. Consequently, “corpses” would rouse during services or right before burial, much to the consternation of mourners who realized the odds of awakening too late.

Measures taken to avoid such a fate indicate the widespread fear that marked the nineteenth century. Wakes were a common way to prevent premature burial. Since funerals were typically held in the home, the body would be displayed in a separate room of the house—often

the parlor— for several days in preparation for burial. According to Gary Lederman, author of *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883*, the duties of the wake involved “watching” or “sitting up” with the corpse to be sure that death had definitely occurred (31). If the vigil of others was not enough, many people inserted clauses into their wills to protect against premature burial; these instructions might range from delaying burial to requesting autopsy or laceration. Bondeson comments on these precautions that began to appear in wills in the previous century: “[I]t was the specific fear that they might awaken in a coffin that prompted their actions. Some individuals specified autopsy, embalming, or even decapitation, to make sure they would really be dead when buried” (78). Ariès cites an example from an 1855 will: “I wish my survivors, before burying me, to assure themselves of my decease by scarification and all the methods utilized in such cases” (400). According to Bondeson, precautionary clauses were included in the wills of several famous people, including Frédéric Chopin and Nikolai Gogol; even General Robert E. Lee was concerned about premature burial after his mother narrowly escaped such a fate (167, 221, 177). This collective apprehension eventually crossed into the judicial system, as several politicians requested that the government institute supervision of burials, establish absolute signs of death, or even adopt the German mortuary system, in which bodies lay in chambers until decay verified death.

Precautionary measures often crossed over into panic, as is evident in the invention and sales of safety coffins. In the second half of the nineteenth-century, many inventors patented “security coffins” equipped with various tools of escape, including ladders, breathing tubes, and aboveground bells attached to the corpse with a string. One patent even provided the corpse with a firecracker to inform those above ground should it revive (Bondeson 25). A safety coffin is among the “series of elaborate precautions” Poe’s narrator takes in “The Premature Burial”:

This coffin was warmly and softly padded, and was provided with a lid [...] with the addition of springs so contrived that the feeblest movement of the body would be sufficient to set it at liberty. Besides all this, there was suspended from the roof of the tomb, a large bell, the rope of which, it was designed, should extend through a hole in the coffin, and so be fastened to one of the hands of the corpse.

(266)

The fear of live burial culminated in the formation of a society in Brooklyn formed in 1886 “for the mutual protection against premature burial” (“Needless Alarm” 4), and its British counterpart, the London Association for the Prevention of Premature Burial. The London founder William Tebb partnered with Dr. Edward Perry Vollum— who was almost buried alive after a near-drowning experience— to write *Premature Burial and How It May Be Prevented: With Special Reference to Trance, Caralepsy, and Other Forms of Suspended Animation*. First published in 1896, the book documented a century of lurid cases of live burial. Tebb and Vollum argue that, in their expert opinions, many people suffered a premature burial:

Premature burials and narrow escapes are of almost every-day occurrence, as the narratives in the newspapers testify; and the complaint [...] that the evil is perpetuated because we are slaves to prejudice, and because those vested with authority refuse to take measures for prevention, remains a serious blot upon our advanced civilisation. (12)

Harnessing the fears of the past century, this book created a new wave of panic regarding premature interment at the turn of the century.

While fear-mongering contributed to this widespread alarm, many people were actually prematurely declared dead. Several factors contributed to these mistakes. The first is that

especially in the first half of the nineteenth-century, when embalming was not commonplace, friends and family untrained in medicine were responsible for preparing the corpse for burial. In addition, some doctors might pronounce death without closely examining the body, and sometimes without looking at it at all. The primary reason for these mistakes is that concrete signs of identifying death were not clearly defined; in fact, it seemed that putrefaction was the only way to be sure, although medical experts argued that there were other equally trustworthy signs. According to Ariès, the passion with which nineteenth-century doctors rejected the threat of apparent death reveals their struggle with a deeper issue of the idea of death as an ambiguous condition or process. Ariès considers the collective panic over being buried alive an early “manifestation of the great modern fear of death” because it “implies the conviction that there is an impure and reversible state that partakes of both life and death” (609). Thus, the anxiety over live burial carried a metaphysical significance greater than the reported scratch marks on the insides of exhumed coffins.

The increased fear of premature burial in the United States can be linked to the collapse of the nation’s religious base in the nineteenth century. America’s Puritan roots had already created a dual concept of death, as David Stannard observes in *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change*. This duality presented death as both a punishment for sin and a reward for righteousness: “[T]he Puritans were gripped individually and collectively by an intense and unremitting fear of death, while *simultaneously* clinging to the traditional Christian rhetoric of viewing death as a release and relief for the earth-bound soul” (79). As Americans began to move away from the traditional Christian system of belief, the fear of death became more acute, as Bondeson notes: “Many people had begun to question the traditional Christian dogma, and the secular rationalism left an emotional vacuum for those who

had to confront the thought of death without the hope for paradise” (77). According to Bondeson, this led to an increased concern over what happened to dead—“or perhaps not so dead”—bodies. He proposes that the void of heaven was unconsciously filled by a “secularized hell” manifested in the physical torments of a premature burial—“the ghoulish minutiae of gnawed hands, bruised heads, and beaten bodies” (77). Keeping with psychoanalysts who connect the tomb to the womb, Bondeson postulates that this feeling may have been exacerbated by psychologically damaging childhood events, namely hellfire sermons and pamphlets on the subject:

A remnant of the child’s natural feeling of omnipotence—to be immortal and the center of the world—remains in most people, and this irrational belief serves the beneficial purpose of protecting against the fear of death. But this brittle psychological defense fails in a child or adolescent frightened, at an impressionable age, by a thunderous sermon describing the torments of souls in hell, or terrorized by a sadistic pamphlet about scratched coffin lids, bloody shrouds, and convulsively clenched skeleton hands full of human hair. (278)

Thus, the fear of premature burial in America is intricately connected to its Puritan roots—both in its movement to escape them and the impossibility of doing so.

While she never specifically mentions premature burial in her cryptic letters, the connection between Emily Dickinson and the collective fear of premature burial can only be inferred from her cultural context and its apparent presence in her poetry. Beginning in Europe, the panic over premature burial took a while to spread to the United States, rising in the mid-nineteenth century; according to Bondeson, this fear was diffused through readily available popular books and magazines rather than the medical establishment (156, 177). Many critics,

among them Jack Capps and Páraic Finnerty, have commented on the fact that Dickinson was an avid reader. In *Emily Dickinson's Reading*, Capps notes that Dickinson read several newspapers, especially *The Springfield Republican*, that kept her abreast of happenings in Amherst, Springfield, and Boston, allowing her to “gain intelligence of the society of her correspondents without having to venture into it physically” (135). In her reading, Dickinson likely ran across several articles referring to premature burials, especially since much of the agitation regarding the issue was centered in Massachusetts (Bondeson 179). In addition, Dickinson enjoyed reading classic literature, which often contains the trope of premature burial, as Bondeson notes.<sup>4</sup> According to Capps, Dickinson was very fond of Shakespeare and habitually read *The King James Bible*; thus, at the very least, she was familiar with the premature interment of Juliet and the resurrection of Lazarus, who emerged from his tomb in his burial clothes. In addition, Dickinson read the popular literature of her time and was aware of Poe, although she claimed “of Poe I know too little to think” (L564).

Dickinson's placement in history and her culture suggests that she was likely aware of the debate on premature burial, and her humanity suggests that she would share this primal fear, however subconsciously. The fear of live burial is a fundamental fear, as even a skeptical writer for the *Journal of American Medical Association* admitted in 1898: “The horror of finding oneself in a living tomb appeals directly to the imagination of every one; it seems the most terrible of all possible deaths” (“Premature Burial” 274). The Puritan ethic under which Dickinson was raised conflated with this subconscious fear, especially because Dickinson wrestled with her own hesitation to be listed among the regenerate. In his biography of the poet, Alfred Habegger notes how Dickinson was often pressured to join the ranks of the “saved,”

particularly when she was a student at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. In one troubling instance, the death of a schoolmate was used to pressure the girls to choose salvation:

Then, in late May, after a Junior passed away saying “she would *gladly* die, if she might be the means of saving *one*,” [...] [seminary founder Mary] Lyon explained that Jesus was speaking through the girl and that heaven’s gates, having opened, “were now scarcely shut.” Everyone was encouraged to “look at the corpse.” A meeting was convened for the impenitent. This was their last chance. (208)

The Puritan association of hell as a punishment for the unregenerate contributed to Dickinson’s preoccupation with death and the grave— especially since she never officially converted (Habegger 242). This influence is evident in a letter she wrote to the Hollands in 1854 in which she reverts to a childlike voice while describing a particularly striking fire-and-brimstone sermon:

The minister to-day, not our own minister, preached about death and judgment, and what would become of those, meaning Austin and me, who behaved improperly— and somehow the sermon scared me and father and Vinnie looked very solemn as if the whole was true, and I would not for worlds have them know that it troubled me, but I longed to come to you, and tell you about it, and learn how to be better. He preached such an awful sermon though, that I didn’t much think I should ever see you again until the Judgment Day, and then you would not speak to me, according to his story. (L175)

Dickinson projected her religious and metaphysical struggle onto the grave, which became her secularized hell that retained the Puritan duality with which she was familiar. This is evident in “So give me back to Death –” (J1632, F1653), a poem penned late in life:

And now, by Life deprived,  
 In my own Grave I breathe  
 And estimate its size –  
 Its size is all that Hell can guess –  
 And all that Heaven was – (4-8)

In this poem, the speaker examines the size of her<sup>5</sup> physical grave, which has become the dual site of heaven and hell. However, the past tense used in reference to “Heaven” suggests that this realm has been replaced by the active “Hell,” the domain that seems to have control over the speaker’s estimation. Interestingly, although deprived of “Life,” this speaker continues to “breathe” as she lies in her grave, suggesting the trope of premature burial. Indeed, in many of Dickinson’s poems, her speakers “die—without the Dying / And live without the Life” (J1017, F1027), existing in the bewildering intermediate state that vexed the nineteenth-century mind.

A full understanding of this trope in Dickinson’s death poetry requires an examination of her experience with death. Like most people in the nineteenth century, Dickinson was intimately acquainted with death, whether it was acquaintances, family members, or close friends. Notably, when she was just twelve years old, the poet attended the deathbed of her second cousin Sophia Holland, which according to Habegger “proved utterly traumatic” (173). Since preparing a body for burial was considered a domestic duty, the female Dickinson likely attended to the details of several wakes and funerals, including that of her parents. This activity is reflected in several of her poems, including “As by the dead we love to sit” (J88, F78) and “The Bustle in a House” (J1078, F1108), which describes “The Morning after Death” as “solemnest of industries / Enacted upon Earth –” (2-4). Through such experiences, Dickinson became well versed in the handling of death, which she systematically relates in “I am alive – I guess –” (J470, F605). In



the poem, Dickinson's speaker assures herself she is alive by reviewing a checklist of common signs that might indicate death. The first reflects the method many nineteenth-century doctors used to check for life: "And if I hold a Glass / Across my Mouth – it blurs it – / Physician's – proof of Breath –" (6-8). She then proves her vitality by insisting that her body is not laid out for a wake "in a Room – / The Parlor – Commonly – it is – / So Visitors may come –" (10-12). The speaker considers the reaction of the mourners, who tilt their heads sideways as they contemplate the corpse's final moments:

And lean – and view it sidewise –  
 And add "How cold – it grew" –  
 And "Was it conscious – when it stepped  
 In Immortality?" (13-16)

Interestingly, the speakers refer to the corpse using the gender-neutral "it," revealing an ambiguity toward the objectified remains, which suggests that the nineteenth-century "Visitors" are unsure how to react to this entity. The speaker offers her final proofs of life: She is not in a coffin— "a House" that is "precise – / And fitting no one else" (18-20) — and she is not in a tomb marked by her "Girlhood's name –" (21). This poem is one of many that display Dickinson's first-hand familiarity with death and show the cultural influences at work in her poetry.

Accustomed to the cultural and religious treatment of the dead, Dickinson reflects in her poetry the doubt many felt toward the physical signs used to verify death. The uncertainty in the title of "I am alive – I *guess*" (emphasis mine) suggests that the boundary between life and death is up for debate. Having convinced herself that she is not dead, the speaker rejoices in her "two-fold" life (27), insinuating that she has been saved from a near-death experience by properly

delineating the difference between life and death. This puzzlement over the verification of death is also evident in “Still own thee – still thou art” (J1633, F1654):

Still own thee – still thou art  
 What surgeons call alive –  
 Though slipping – slipping I perceive  
 To thy reportless Grave – (1-4)

Here, the speaker seems to distrust the medical establishment’s definition of death, suggesting that the dying person is only what doctors “call alive”— a term that contradicts the speaker’s opinion that the person is closer to death. Still, the speaker believes in a definite moment of death, as the dying person will slip completely into their “reportless Grave,” where communication will cease. Approaching that final moment, the speaker grasps for questions she should pose to the person at the threshold of physical death:

Which question shall I clutch –  
 What answer wrest from thee  
 Before thou dost exude away  
 In the recallless [sic] sea? (5-8)

The speaker clearly senses that death is imminent and desires to “wrest”— or “twist” (*OED*) — existential answers from one approaching the boundary between life and death that momentarily bridges a “recallless sea.” However, the speaker is unable to verbalize her questions; she can only examine the process of physical death to determine the point at which it occurs. In “Dickinson’s Chemistry of Death,” Eric Wilson characterizes the poet’s analysis death: “scientific, empirical: focused, intense, patient, she examines the morphology of death before,

during, and after its strike” (32). Dickinson’s scientific examination is evident in “A throe upon the features –” (J71, F105):

A throe upon the features –

A hurry in the breath –

An ecstasy of parting

Denominated “Death” – (1-4)

In this poem, Dickinson’s speaker meticulously lists the facial expressions and final breath of a dying person in order to define “Death.” While systematic, Dickinson’s description is also violent, describing death as a “throe,” denoting both a “violent spasm” and “agony of the mind,” and “ecstasy,” which indicates being “beside oneself” with anxiety or fear (*OED*). Similarly, in “After great pain, a formal feeling comes –” (J341, F372), the speaker metaphorically captures the pain of loss by empirically describing death by exposure in an unsettling catalog:

“Remembered, if outlived, / As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow – / First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –” (11-13). The detachment of Dickinson’s narrators makes her empirical descriptions of death isolating and terrifying. For example, the catalogued description of death in “Departed – to the Judgment –” (J524, F399) — the “Flesh – Surrendered – Cancelled” (5) — is utterly solitary: “Two Worlds – like Audiences – disperse – / And leave the Soul – alone –” (7-8). For Dickinson’s speakers, crossing the line between life and death is an ambiguous and frightening moment.

Several of Dickinson’s poems demonstrate that while the moment of physical death is “recallless,” the process of dying can be reversed—and the dying can come back to life. This is evident in “Sweet, to have had them lost” (J901)<sup>6</sup>:

Sweet, to have had them lost

For news that they be saved –

The nearer they departed Us

The nearer they, restored, (1-4)

The speaker rejoices in the revival of people that were “saved” and “restored” before crossing the line of departure to death. In the second stanza, she names those “Next precious” that “rose to go – / Then thought of Us, and stayed” (7-9), suggesting that people can return from the very edge of the boundary between life and death. In “No crowd that has occurred” (J515, F653), a crowd gathers to watch a “Resurrection”:

Circumference be full –

The long restricted Grave

Assert her Vital Privilege –

The Dust – connect – and live – (4-8)

In this poem, the Grave again becomes a place of life, asserting vitality that allows the “Dust” of a person to connect “and live.” Similarly, in “Just lost, when I was saved!” (J160, F132), the narrator discusses her premature encounter with death:

Just felt the world go by!

Just girt me for the onset with Eternity,

When breath blew back

And on the other side

I heard recede the disappointed tide! (2-6)

After her narrow escape from the carnivorous “tide” which is “disappointed” to lose its victim, the speaker claims she feels “Odd secrets of the line to tell!” (8). However, she does not reveal the secrets she has uncovered, nor does she mention crossing the “line.” In fact, the “Next time”

she approaches the line—presumably her final encounter with death—she plans to “tarry” there in order to “see” the secrets, indicating that she will not partake in them herself (16, 13). Her plan to linger there “While the Ages steal – / Slow tramp the Centuries, / And the Cycles wheel!” (17-19) suggests that the speaker may never cross the line into death, instead remaining in a kind of immortal suspension. Similarly, in “Advance is Life’s condition” (J1652, F1736), Dickinson’s speaker cannot pinpoint the line of death, identifying the “Grave” as a “Relay” although it is “Supposed to be a terminus” (2-3). Although her “Existence” is blocked by a “wall”—a concrete border—the “Tunnel” leading to it “is not lighted” (5-6), indicating that this barrier between life and death cannot be clearly distinguished and increasing the possibility of being prematurely declared dead, as in the case of the speaker in “My life closed twice before its close –” (J1732, F1773). While this poem has been read as a meditation over tragedies in Dickinson’s life, it is interesting to read it literally. Dickinson’s speaker has already “died” twice, but has returned from the grave to await the “third event”—ostensibly her actual death, which will be “So huge, so hopeless to conceive / As these that twice befell” (4-6). According to the speaker, this “Parting” is “all we know of heaven, / And all we need of hell” (7-8), again making the grave the site of the confusion between life and death.

The mystification of the signs of life and death create a fault line of anxiety that runs through much of Dickinson’s death poetry. This angst is perhaps most obvious in “If He were living – dare I ask –” (J734, F719), an enigmatic poem in which the speaker seems to be questioning the death of a man, yet fears to verbalize her doubts:

If He were living – dare I ask –  
 And how if He be dead –  
 And so around the Words I went –

## Of meeting them – afraid – (1-4)

In the second quatrain, the speaker seems to be examining the physical “Changes” on the corpse’s face to see if they are merely the result of “Lapse of Time” and “Surface of Years” (5-6). However, she touches the man “with Caution – lest they crack – / And show me to my fears” (8), suggesting her anxiety that her doubts may be substantiated as the changes on the corpse’s face “crack” with signs of life. The speaker turns away from the corpse to converse with “adjoining Lives,” deciding to expel her doubts about the diagnosis of death: “Adroitly turning out / Wherever I suspected Graves – / ’Twas pruder – I thought –” (10-12). However, the speaker’s anxiety takes over as she feels that she has “pushed” the man into the grave “with sudden force – / In face of the Suspense –” (13-14). The fretful exclamations that follow imply that the man should not have been buried: “Was buried” – “Buried”! “He!” (15). The cryptic final line—“My Life just holds the Trench”—hints that Dickinson’s narrator feels as if she has dug the man’s grave herself and, like her sister speakers, she conflates life with the grave.

It is from both the grave and beyond that several of Dickinson’s speakers narrate poems suggesting the trope of live interment. These speakers use terse phrases and ambiguous terms to describe their firsthand experiences with “death.” Dickinson’s characteristic use of the past tense suggests that her narrators are speaking from beyond the grave—the point at which language is supposed to fail. Paul Scott Derrick notes that “death is—we assume—the limit beyond which language, as the vehicle of communicable experience, cannot go. [...] [E]ach poem takes us as far as language, or consciousness, can go before passing over into the silence” (228-9).

Consequently, the fact that the narrators can still speak suggests that they are “undead” beings who have not crossed over the line between life and death, although the world might recognize them as dead. Instead, they are entombed in a conscious realm between life and death. For

example, the narrator of “I died for Beauty—but was scarce” (J449, F448) has not entered into the conventional celestial realms promised in sentimental literature despite the poem’s domestic imagery. Instead, the speaker lies trapped within her grave:

I died for Beauty – but was scarce  
 Adjusted in the Tomb  
 When One who died for Truth, was lain  
 In an adjoining Room –  
 [.....]  
 And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night –  
 We talked between the Rooms –  
 Until the Moss had reached our lips –  
 And covered up – our names – (1-4, 9-12)

In this poem, death mirrors life; in fact, the scene between the two “Kinsmen” seems convivial, with the dead retaining their human ability to carry on a conversation. However, Dickinson twists the domestic image with “Moss,” a symbol of deterioration that removes all signs of the corpses’ identities. Although the speaker reports from beyond the grave, she offers no consolation of an afterlife; instead, the poem implies that her consciousness in the grave continues beyond her ability to speak to her peer. Similarly, the speaker of “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –” (J465, F591) recaps her deathbed scene:

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away  
 What portion of me be  
 Assignable – and then it was  
 There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –

Between the light – and me –

And then the Windows failed – and then

I could not see to see – (9-16)

The speaker from beyond the grave does not share any eternal hope of a glorious afterlife with the dry “Eyes” (5) that watch her death, but only relates “the collapse of consciousness in death” as Yonjae Jung observes (156). The lone symbol of death is the troubling “Buzz” of a grotesque fly who blocks the ambiguous “light” of either the physical room or the metaphysical afterlife. Wilson notes the possible dual meanings of the symbol: “[I]s the buzzing an irritation that demeans this moment customarily thought to be so significant or is it a charge of energy—an electric hum—that hopefully betokens life, suggesting that life goes on, [in] this world and elsewhere?” (40). Readers are left questioning what the narrator cannot “see,” but the speaker does not answer, although her use of the past tense suggests that she could. However, like the narrator who “died for beauty,” this “undead” voice has been silenced by the “Moss” of death.

While these speakers share chilling glimpses from beyond the “grave,” several narrators describe death from inside it, suggesting that physical death has not yet occurred. The speaker of “Because I could not stop for Death –” (J712, F479) rides in a carriage steered by “Death” to her grave—a “Swelling of the Ground” (18). The poem suggests the image of a coffin being carried in a hearse to its burial site, a practice that gained popularity in the nineteenth century (Lederman 33-4). The narrator describes the procession of her funeral, chronicling the sites the carriage passes as it proceeds to the burial site at sunset. The narrator’s admission that she is “quivering and chill” from the “Dews” indicates that her burial clothes — “Gossamer” and “Tulle” — are



impractical for the weather and that she is still conscious enough to feel cold (13-16). When the carriage pauses in front of her tomb, the speaker realizes that she is facing “Eternity” (24). However, the narrator remains “undead” as she stands before her grave for “Centuries” (21); the poem neither clarifies the moment of death nor discusses the afterlife. Derrick argues that this poem lengthens the split second between “Death” and “Eternity,” the “abstract nouns” in the first and last lines of the poem: “If they seem to occur between the moment of death and the unconsciousness of death, couldn’t that be because the poem itself, from beginning to end, is that borderline?” (230). Derrick’s astute assessment can be applied to several of Dickinson’s poems that are narrated by the “undead” who seem to exist outside of time, in the boundary between life and death.

This borderline is perhaps most terrifying from the point of view of a narrator who has been prematurely declared dead. The speaker of “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” (J280, F340) is aware that her own funeral is occurring, but is helpless to stop it— a phenomenon reported by several people who eventually escaped premature burial:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,  
 And Mourners to and fro  
 Kept treading – treading – till it seemed  
 That sense was breaking through – (1-4)

The repetitive treading of the mourners in front of the coffin begins to arouse the narrator’s consciousness, a phenomenon that mirrors a tale in Poe’s “The Premature Burial”: “He heard the footsteps of the crowd overhead, and endeavored to make himself heard in turn. It was the tumult within the grounds of the cemetery, he said, which appeared to awaken him from a deep sleep, but no sooner was he awake than he became fully aware of the awful horrors of his position”

(261). Like Poe's unfortunate character, the reader's terror escalates as the mental condition of Dickinson's speaker is revealed. The poem continues:

And when they all were seated,  
 A Service, like a Drum –  
 Kept beating – beating – till I thought  
 My Mind was going numb – (5-8)

The narrator compares the service to a “Drum” (6), evoking images of a still-beating heart whose numb repetition echoes the mourners' “treading.” She begins to lose consciousness until she senses the pallbearers lifting her coffin to carry her to her grave: “And then I heard them lift a Box / And creak across my Soul / With those same Boots of Lead, again” (9-11). At this point, all of the narrator's faculties except her hearing have failed, as she seems to be caught between two realms as her sensory perception persists:

Then Space – began to toll,  
 As the Heavens were a Bell  
 And Being, but an Ear,  
 And I, and Silence, some strange Race  
 Wrecked, solitary, here – (12-16)

The speaker pairs metaphysical terms such as “Space” and “the Heavens” with physical terms such as “Bell” and “Ear,” blurring the line between the two realms and evoking the image of dirt being thrown into the “Space” of the empty grave— and perhaps jostling the “Bell” of a security coffin. Dickinson allows her speaker's sensory awareness to continue in order to emphasize the mental and physical terror of premature burial. The speaker's burial leaves her alone,

sequestering her remaining sense of hearing with “Silence.” This silence marks her official death or her break with “Reason”<sup>7</sup> as indicated in the final quatrain:

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,  
 And I dropped down, and down –  
 And hit a World, at every plunge,  
 And Finished knowing – then – (17-20)

Like the other speakers from the grave, the narrator leaves a dash in the place of further knowledge and offers no sentimental comfort for her readers. And, like her sister narrators, the speaker of “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain” remains “undead,” as her claim of silence is negated by the poem itself—the words she continues to speak from beyond the grave.

The undead speaker of “It was not Death, for I stood up” (J510, F355) similarly narrates from the grave, attempting to characterize her intermediate physical state that “was not Death.” The speaker is aware enough to note the time of day—“for all the Bells / Put out their Tongues, for Noon” (3-4) and feel the physical sensations of wind and heat on her body (5-8). However, she acknowledges that her state feels similar to death:

And yet, it tasted, like them all,  
 The Figures I have seen  
 Set orderly, for Burial,  
 Reminded me, of mine –  
 As if my life were shaven  
 And fitted to a frame  
 And could not breathe without a key, (9-15)

By referring to her own “Burial” in the past tense and comparing her life to a coffin—“shaven / And fitted to a frame”— Dickinson’s speaker merges life and death while attempting to differentiate them from the intermediate state in which she exists. In the final two quatrains, she attempts to characterize this condition that is neither life nor death:

When everything that ticked – has stopped –

And Space stares all around –

Or Grisly frosts – first Autumn morns,

Repeal the Beating Ground –

But most, like Chaos – Stopless– cool –

Without a Chance, or Spar –

Or even a Report of Land –

To justify – Despair. (17-24)

Like her sister speaker of “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” this narrator describes the intermediary state between life and death as a suspension in time. All clocks have stopped and an empty “Space” fills the void; in fact, the only sound is “the Beating Ground” that evokes the beating drum of “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain.” The speaker emphasizes that the state in which she is trapped is “Stopless,” without “even a Report of Land” on the other side, suggesting she will be trapped in the state that “was not Death” for eternity.

Those poems that attempt to isolate the borderline between life and death, between consciousness and unconsciousness, illustrate Dickinson’s lifelong attempt to grasp the concept of the afterlife, of consciousness separated from life on earth. In a letter to Abiah Root, Dickinson admits that she cannot comprehend eternity:

Does not Eternity appear dreadful to you. I often get thinking of it and it seems so dark to me that I almost wish there was no Eternity. To think that we must live forever and never cease to be. It seems as if Death which all so dread because it launches us upon an unknown world would be a relief [sic] to so endless a state of existence [sic]. I don't [sic] know why it is but it does not seem to me that I shall ever cease to live on earth—I cannot imagine with the farthest stretch of my imagination my own death scene— It does not seem to me that I shall ever close my eyes in death. (L10)

Even at the age of sixteen, Dickinson cannot disassociate consciousness from death. In her influential *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross explains this human inability to imagine death: “[I]n our unconscious, death is never possible in regard to ourselves. It is inconceivable for our unconscious to imagine an actual ending of our own life here on earth” (2). Dickinson’s poetry reveals this mental effort to reconcile death and consciousness—an unsuccessful exertion that may have fueled the anxiety over live burial, specifically the theme of consciousness in the grave, that is evident in her poetry.<sup>8</sup> As such, she often sees human consciousness as a curse, as the speaker of “Of Consciousness, her awful Mate” (J894, F1076) mourns: “Of Consciousness, her awful Mate / The Soul cannot be rid” (1-2). Even the concept of immortality—of eternal consciousness—is tormenting, as the speaker in “Why should we hurry – why indeed?” (J1646, F1683) contends: “We are molested equally / By immortality. / No respite from the inference” (3-5). Dickinson’s struggle with consciousness leads her speakers to spurn the existence that they did not choose. In “I am afraid to Own a Body –” (J1090, F1050), Dickinson’s speaker admits that she fears owning both a “Body” and a “Soul” because both are “Profound – precarious Property” whose “Possession” is “not optional” (1-4). Indeed, Dickinson feels burdened by

consciousness and immortality because she cannot disassociate the two concepts from death, as expressed by the speaker in “This Consciousness that is aware” (J822, F817):

This Consciousness that is aware  
Of Neighbors and the Sun  
Will be the one aware of Death  
And that itself alone

Is traversing the interval  
Experience between  
And most profound experiment  
Appointed unto Men – (1-8)

In the first two quatrains, Dickinson describes death as a continuation of her “Consciousness,” the only aspect of herself that she will be able to take when “traversing the interval” between life and death. This suggests the terrifying side of consciousness—that it is what will make her realize her own death. In the final lines of the poem, the speaker ponders this problem of consciousness:

Adventure most unto itself  
The Soul condemned to be –  
Attended by a single Hound  
Its own identity. (13-16)

In this poem, the speaker tries to describe the lonely “Adventure” to which her immortal “Soul” is “condemned.” The soul is literally dogged by the “Hound” of “Its own identity,” in this case the “Consciousness” of which it cannot be rid. The arresting metaphor of identity as a “Hound”

evokes the “Goblin Bee” that “goads” the speaker of “If you were coming in the Fall” (J511, F356), who is “uncertain of the length / Of this, that is between” life and death (17-20).

Dickinson’s speakers verbalize the poet’s exertion to mentally grasp the concept of a consciousness that even outlasts death.

The burden of consciousness heightens Dickinson’s desire to achieve the death that may end it; however, her inability to comprehend her “Stopless” awareness makes her quest seem impossible. In the final stanza of “My life had stood – a Loaded Gun –” (J754, F764), Dickinson’s speaker seems to covet the ability of her “Master” to die, a “power” that she lacks: “For I have but the power to kill, / Without – the power to die –” (23-4).<sup>9</sup> Dickinson projects this powerlessness onto the moon in “I watched the Moon around the House” (J629, F593):

But like a Head – a Guillotine  
 Slid carelessly away –  
 Did independent, Amber –  
 Sustain her in the sky (13-16).

The feminine “Moon” is beheaded, yet remains active in its orbit around the earth, suspended in the “Amber” of its own consciousness. In another reflection on death in “I tried to think a lonelier Thing” (J532, F570), Dickinson creates a “Duplicate” of her speaker, who tries to meet her twin lost “Somewhere – / Within the Clutch of Thought” (8-9):

I plucked at our Partition  
 As One should pry the Walls –  
 Between Himself – and Horror’s Twin –  
 Within Opposing Cells – (12-15)

In this quatrain, Dickinson attempts to grasp the “Partition” that symbolizes the boundary between death and life. In “Trying to Think With Emily Dickinson,” Jed Deppman observes that the speaker equates herself with the twin by using the collective pronoun “our” (98). The speaker clearly feels imprisoned by the shared “Partition”—which keeps her from clasping her duplicate’s “Hand” (16). Although she has the ability to pity this “one Other Creature / Of Heavenly Love – forgot –” (10-11), the speaker perceives the likelihood that her “dead twin” feels pity for her inability to cross over to death: “Perhaps he – pitied me –” (19). Dickinson’s inability to cross the “Partition” explains why she is “afraid to own” both a body and a soul in “I am afraid to own a Body”: “Double Estate – entailed at pleasure / Upon an unsuspecting Heir – / Duke in a moment of Deathlessness” (5-7). Dickinson’s speaker ironically embraces her unwanted inheritance by pronouncing herself “Duke” over the unending “moment” in which her consciousness is trapped. As reluctant monarch, Dickinson’s speaker grudgingly reigns over the inescapable physical consciousness that she fears.

Dickinson’s concern over her own “Deathlessness” makes her envy corpses that seem to “have the power to die” and escape the consciousness of this life. The connection is evident in “’Tis so appalling – it exhilarates –” (J281, F341). In this early poem, Dickinson’s speaker admits her enthrallment with death:

’Tis so appalling – it exhilarates –  
 So over Horror, it half Captivates –  
 The Soul stares after it, secure –  
 A Sepulchre, fears frost, no more –

To scan a Ghost, is faint –



But grappling, conquers it –

How easy, Torment, now—

Suspense kept sawing so –

The Truth, is Bald, and Cold –

But that will hold –

If any are not sure –

We show them – prayer –

But we, who know,

Stop hoping, now – (1-14)

In this poem, the narrator is captivated and exhilarated by the incessant “sawing” of suspense as she examines the “appalling” moment when a person passes from life to death. The exact boundary remains unclear to viewers in the room who pray for the person to appease any who “are not sure” of the person’s death and thus fear a live burial. However, the speaker counts herself as one of the “we, who know”; she asserts the certainty of the death, gaining authority through her claim that “Looking at Death, is Dying” (15). Instead of scanning the “Ghost,” the speaker has decided to enter in with its death by “grappling” with it. Through her profound identification with the process, the narrator has conquered death and made it her own. This triumphant speaker is finally able to achieve the certainty of death by attaining it before she is taken to the grave; thus, there is nothing to fear in the continuation of her consciousness. Instead, her “Soul” is “secure” in its examination of the horror of death because it is already dead—it is a “Sepulchre” or a tomb that must only fear the elements that threaten its exterior. The speaker’s metaphorical death sets her free from the “Fright” (22) and “Terror” (23) of consciousness and

separates her from those who “are not sure” of the finality of death. In the same way, each of her “undead” sisters also achieve death through their own close analyses of the grave, just as Dickinson attempted to work out her fears in her poetry. Indeed, the description of death as a “Gay, Ghastly, Holiday!” in final line of the poem suggests that once the fear is exorcised, Dickinson is able to look at death with a macabre humor.

However, Dickinson’s humor may also hold back her fear, as later poems suggest a continuous struggle to contain anxiety over death. In a letter written to T.W. Higginson later in life, Dickinson summarizes her struggle to grasp the concepts of death and consciousness through an apt metaphor: “These sudden intimacies with Immortality, are expanse – not Peace – as Lightning at our feet, instills a foreign Landscape” (L641). Despite her apprehension regarding this “expanse,” Dickinson boldly examines the cultural fear of death’s “shadowy and vague” boundaries in her poetry, illuminating the terrifying realm of consciousness in death by extending the fear of live burial to include the concept of eternal consciousness. And although Dickinson herself avoided a premature burial by being embalmed (Fuss 39), a relatively new process when she died in 1886, her poetry continues to speak from beyond the grave.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dickinson’s poems are numbered after their title according to the collections edited by Thomas Johnson (Abbrev. J) in 1962 and R.W. Franklin (Abbrev. F) in 1999. Citations are taken from the standard Johnson edition; parenthetical documentation after cited lines indicates specific line numbers.

<sup>2</sup> Dickinson’s correspondence is cited according to the classification system established by Johnson in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Abbrev. L) in 1958.

<sup>3</sup> Jed Deppman, Roxanne Harde, Eric Wilson, and Paul Scott Derrick offer particularly satisfying insight into the Dickinson and the sublime.

<sup>4</sup> Bondeson helpfully devotes a chapter to tracing the development of literary premature burials, focusing on the work of Edgar Allen Poe and Friederike Kempner.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Dickinson's narrators have no specific gender in her poems; in fact, this neutral and ambiguous voice is one of the many appeals of her poetry. However, for the purpose of this study, Dickinson's narrators will be referred to as female.

<sup>6</sup> This poem is not listed in Franklin's reading edition.

<sup>7</sup> In her survey of Dickinson's poetry, Harde suggests that "Faith" is the best synonym for "the Plank" that appears in Dickinson's poem (7). This observation supports the conflict between her Puritan upbringing and the breakdown of Christian dogma in the nineteenth-century. Here the speaker's faith fails as she realizes the secularized hell in which she is trapped is her afterlife.

<sup>8</sup> There are only one or two known photographs of Dickinson, who rejected her father's request to sit for a photograph. She records her reasons for this in a letter to T.W. Higginson: "It often alarms Father – He says Death might occur, and he has Molds of all the rest – but has no Mold of Me, but I noticed the Quick wore off those things in a few days, and forestall the dishonor" (L268). In a fascinating section on post-mortem photography, Michael Steiner suggests the association of photographs with immortality (73). Perhaps this explains Dickinson's reluctance to have her photograph taken—a subconscious fear of being "buried alive" within the image.

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, in "If any sink, assure that this, now standing –" (J358, F616), Dickinson asserts the reverse of this statement: "Dying – annuls the power to kill" (8). In this poem, the speaker "enters Silence" when she is shot, again indicating the cessation of language but not of consciousness.

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